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ABSTRACT

This report addresses the problem of retaining and graduating college students, particularly black students, in 4-year college programs. Seven key ideas are suggested: (1) colleges granting admission to students who lack adequate preparation should offer appropriate developmental or remedial support to these students; (2) colleges should ensure that enrolled students have adequate financial resources; (3) the college should provide a structure where at least one person is deeply concerned about each individual student; (4) the college should provide opportunities for each student to achieve a sense of belonging and purpose; (5) colleges should rigorously assess their educational programs for meeting students' needs; (6) colleges should modify practices and policies which impede student retention; and (7) the college should keep accurate records of student retention/graduation. In addition, three established practices (such as extensive lecturing) in American colleges are questioned with regard to their effect on student retention. Finally, it is noted that if the steps discussed are going to be implemented, vigorous leadership will be required. Contains nine references. (GLR)

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Research Report

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IMPROVING RETENTION RATES OF BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS:

A CALL FOR ACTION

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by
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Educators throughout the country are showing greater concern and sensitivity to the issues of student retention and graduation. In a follow-up study of entering freshmen who began college in 1981, Astin, Korn, and Green (1987) have called attention to the relatively low graduation rate in American colleges and universities and have pointed out that the situation is getting worse instead of better. They write: "The proportion [of students in four-year colleges] completing a bachelor's degree within four years is remarkably low (31.2 percent), especially in comparison to figures from 15 years earlier (46.7 percent of the 1966 freshmen had earned degrees by 1970). For whatever reason, it would appear that retention rates for students entering four-year colleges and universities have declined substantially during the past fifteen years."

Recent data published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that black students are graduating from college at a lesser rate than other students. Although blacks comprise about 14 percent of the nation's college-age population and about nine percent of the college enrollment, they account for only about six percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded to U.S. citizens. According to the NCES (in a report dated June, 1990), black enrollment at all types of institutions of higher education stood at 1,129,580 in fall, 1988, 8.7 percent of the total U.S. enrollment of 13,043,118. In another report, NCES (January 1991) has presented extensive data concerning degrees awarded in the U.S. In the most recent year for which data was reported 1988-89, blacks accounted for 58,016 (5.7 percent) of the 1.015 million bachelor's degrees awarded by U.S. colleges and universities.

In a study prepared for the National Institute of Independent Colleges and Universities, Porter (1989) found that only about one-quarter of black students who began college in the fall of 1980 had completed their bachelor's degree requirements by the spring of 1986. (His study used data from the High School and Beyond Study of the U.S. Department of Education.)

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Studies containing graduation figures pertaining to black students have recently been published by higher education agencies in a number of states. In Georgia, for example, a study reported by Anderson (1989) showed that in the state's 20 public four-year colleges or universities only about 16 percent of all black students who entered these institutions were graduated within five years. The graduation rates were computed for first-time, full-time entering students who matriculated in fall, 1983. The study examined the graduation rates of regularly admitted black students as well as those who were initially admitted into a developmental studies program. (In general, students with either a verbal or a math score lower than 350 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test were placed in the developmental studies program.) The study showed a considerable difference in the graduation rates for those who entered as regular students in contrast to those who entered as developmental students: 30 percent of the regular students were graduated as opposed to only ten percent of the developmental students. Similar findings have also been reported in Tennessee and North Carolina. Such reports point to a serious retention problem for black students in these public institutions.

If these figures are going to be improved (and this paper argues that they must), then decisive action will be required. The low retention and graduation rates of black students in our colleges need to be addressed, since the whole social and economic welfare of our country is at stake. As the black population continues to grow at a faster rate than the overall population, it is essential that more black persons be prepared to fill key leadership positions in our society. This leadership training can best be achieved through the completion of a college program of study. Seven key ideas which could improve the retention and graduation rates of black students at our colleges are discussed below.

I. If a college grants admission to students who lack adequate preparation for college-level work, the college should offer appropriate developmental or remedial support to these students.

In outlining undergraduate admission standards in its Criteria for Accreditation, The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) states:

> The admission policies must be related to the educational purposes of the institution. They must establish such qualitative and quantitative requirements as to admit students who demonstrate reasonable potential for success. In the absence of such requirements, an institution must offer appropriate developmental or remedial support to assist students in overcoming deficiencies in their preparation for collegiate study. Diagnostic testing can be an important element of a developmental or remedial program.

Many colleges (including most UNCF institutions) recognize that underprepared students face enormous difficulties and thus have instituted a number of developmental programs to aid these students; these programs seek to give these students the academic background necessary for handling the regular college-level curriculum. One of the needs of these programs is the development of a more systematic evaluation of their effectiveness. Another need is the development of a more widely recognized set of standards pertaining to these programs. The term "college-level" work is vague and can lead to wide differences in interpretation.

In evaluating developmental programs, one of the key issues is the determination of standards for placement in and out of the program. Obviously, some students are going to need more time than others in order to bring their academic skills up to acceptable standards. However, if the college has a rigid policy that prohibits students from remaining in a developmental program for longer than one year, than some students will be ill served. Also, if financial aid awards are based on some requirement for taking a minimum number of college-level courses, the student who needs to be enrolled exclusively in developmental courses will be at a disadvantage.

II. The college should insure that each student who enrolls has adequate financial resources.

The goals of a good financial aid program should dictate that any student without sufficient funds be provided with enough money so that the student can devote sufficient time to his/her program of study, pay obligations to the college in a timely manner, and live in a healthy, safe, and educationally stimulating

environment. Colleges with large numbers of needy students should insist that every student have adequate finances to meet all necessary colleges expenses. Although having funds for tuition and fees and room and board will meet the major portion of a student's expenses, the student must also have adequate funds for books and supplies, transportation, and personal expenses in order to function well. These indirect costs of attending college are vital to a student's livelihood and unless they are also covered in the student's budget, the student will resort to all sorts of economizing measures – e.g., not buying textbooks, not eating properly, working excessive hours, etc.

In awarding financial aid, colleges should establish a clear priority that institutional funds available for student financial aid should first be directed to needy students and that non-needy students should be given awards only after the full needs of the needy students have been met. Although many colleges administer scholarship funds for private donors who often stipulate that these privately donated funds be restricted to academically superior students, colleges should make a more vigorous effort to inform new scholarship donors of the tremendous need for funds for needy students. Since there is little evidence to indicate that merit awards given to non-needy students induce significant numbers to change their choice of college, funds used for these awards could be better used to provide more adequate awards for the truly needy students.

Colleges should also insist that all financially needy students work cooperatively with the college's financial aid office before enrollment to prepare and gain approval of a sound financial planning budget for each needy student. Colleges should resist approving a budget that shows that the student has only a vague notion of getting a loan or working in order to cover financial shortfalls. Instead, colleges should ask students to prepare realistic budgets which should show the projected costs for all college-related items and the sources of the needed funds. Obviously, the amount of financial counselling with students before enrollment would be increased as the staff of the financial aid office would have to review these budgets with students, but such an effort would pay tremendous dividends in helping the students and the college to develop more realistic plans.

III. The college should provide an organizational structure that will insure that at least one person at the college is deeply concerned about and cares for each individual student.

One of the great attractions of small liberal arts colleges over large state universities is the belief that at a small college a student will not get lost in the crowd – that because of the relatively low enrollment at the small liberal arts college, the student will be given individual attention. (The mission statements of many member colleges of the United Negro College Fund reflect this position.)

In the belief that a low student/faculty ratio insures more individual student attention, a college with a low student/faculty ratio will often report this fact in its recruiting and promotional material. Unfortunately, a low student/faculty ratio, by itself, is no guarantee that someone at the college will be sensitive to the needs of the individual student. It is probably true that low student/faculty ratios offer the greater possibility for such caring, but it is not a certainty that caring relationships will automatically occur.

In order for a college to provide all its students the kind of student/faculty interaction that is so important in promoting retention, the college must actively stress the importance of these interactions by all available means – the faculty handbook, the adviser's manual, exhortations by the president, dean, and department head, and perhaps by letters from appreciative parents. Care must be taken to insure an effective organizational structure so that students and faulty will get together at regular sessions in small groups – groups in which the individual student can be affirmed. These groups should meet bi-weekly throughout the year and should be small enough to insure that any student who misses a session will be missed by the group and followed up to determine the reason for the absence and/or any difficulties that the student may be experiencing. Typical concerns at these sessions might focus on effective study methods, securing financial aid, or handling a troublesome roommate situation. Most important is the fact that the sessions are organized by the college and that the college is committed to recognizing the vital importance and worth of each individual student.

IV. The college should provide opportunities for each student to fulfill a sense of importance and belonging—a sense that the student's presence at the college is needed and useful and that the student is responsible for his/her own learning.

Students need to feel that they are in control of the learning activities which affect them. Many studies of the effect of peer tutoring have found that students who are in charge of the tutoring sessions often benefit as much as do the students receiving the tutoring. Other studies have consistently pointed out that students who achieve leadership roles at college are much more likely to persist. All of us like to feel that we are needed, that we are important, and that other people's lives will be made better by our actions. Perhaps most important is the simple notion that we like to know that we are actively involved with our own learning program.

Some colleges have institutionalized this idea of service with good results. Early in the history of Tuskegee University, the students actually helped in the construction of many of the first buildings on that campus. Berea College in Kentucky charges no tuition, but insists that each student work in some meaningful occupation while enrolled in college; in fact, Berea may be the only college in the U.S. to have a Dean of Labor as a full-time college administrator. Students who perform meaningful work while on campus consistently report that their work experiences were a valuable part of their overall college experience.

In emphasizing the student's own responsibility for learning, some colleges have used the portfolio method to help students keep a running account of their growth and development. Colleges that use this approach encourage students to write daily in a personal journal, to keep copies of all prepared papers, and to write summaries of conferences with faculty members. Also, included in a student's portfolio would be any letters of commendation or recommendation and any awards received.

V. The college should become more rigorous in the evaluation of its programs to insure that these programs are meeting the needs of students.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), one of the nation's six regional accrediting agencies, has pioneered in the development of standards pertaining to outcomes assessment. No longer satisfied with such traditional evaluative criteria as the number of books in the library or the number of faculty holding the Ph.D., SACS has mandated that colleges in its region must include outcomes assessments as one of the critical dimensions that determine whether an institution will continue to be listed as an accredited institution. SACS has published guidelines for institutions wishing to implement more effective evaluative procedures. Under the new criteria, institutions are expected to:

- establish adequate procedures for planning and evaluation;
- define expected educational results;
- formulate educational goals;
- develop procedures for evaluating the extent to which these educational goals are being achieved; and
- use the results of these evaluations to improve institutional effectiveness.

SACS has also listed a number of more specific procedures which might be used to evaluate instructional programs:

- peer evaluation of educational programs;
- structured interviews with students and graduates;
- changes in students' values as measured by standard instruments or self-reported behavior patterns;
- pre- and post-testing of students;
- surveys of recent graduates;
- student scores on standardized examinations or locally constructed examinations;
- performance of graduates in graduate school.

It is encouraging that a number of colleges, including many UNCF member institutions, are already moving forward with this new evaluation initiative. One particularly interesting approach is the

surveying of freshmen at the end of their first year and the surveying of graduating seniors immediately prior to graduation. These surveys allow students to tell the college about their level of satisfaction with a whole host of campus services as well as to indicate future plans. These surveys will become even more useful as the colleges share data with each other so that each individual institution can compare its findings with those of other similar institutions.

The new ways of evaluating programs may be difficult to incorporate because many of us who serve as college administrators or faculty members have grown complacent about the content of our programs and services and the ways in which they are delivered. Few of us have experienced ways of conducting the educational enterprise other than those which we experienced as students ourselves. Since the public and various funding agencies have too often judged colleges on factors which are extraneous to the growth and development of the individual student, e.g., enrollment growth, a balanced budget, or whether or not a new building was either in construction or being planned, we have generally not used evaluation methods which measure the college's most important goals.

Dysfunctional educational behavior requires a willingness to accept that there is a problem. As long as we stress enrollment growth and balanced budgets as the major needs of higher education, there will be little attention given to other more important goals. What is needed is the recognition that positive human development is the main purpose of our colleges and that in our quest for financial stability and enrollment growth, we must never waver in our attention and concern for the wholesome development of the individual student.

VI. Colleges should be willing to modify a number of longstanding practices and procedures which, consciously or unconsciously, may have a detrimental effect on the retention of students, particularly black students.

It is time for a thorough evaluation of a number of practices which have long been accepted as an integral part of the American college experience. For thousands of students, many of these practices may well be a partial cause of their decision to drop out. Three of the more questionable practices and programs are discussed below.

The lecture. A recent study of teaching faculty at American colleges (Astin, 1990) inquired about the extent to which various teaching methods were used. Not surprisingly, "extensive lecturing" was found to be one of the most frequently used methods at all types of institutions. In contrast, such methods as independent projects, cooperative learning, group projects, and student-developed activities/topics were used relatively infrequently. It seems strange that the lecture still holds such a preeminent position since numerous studies over the years have shown that it is one of the least effective learning methods. Lectures do not promote student involvement; they are a crutch for the instructor to say that "the material has been covered" rather than a way to stimulate and motivate students. Extensive lectures are a prime cause of student disenchantment with college education. In contrast to the poor learning effects of the lecture, Uri Treisman (1985) at the University of California (Berkeley) has forcefully and consistently demonstrated the tremendous value of group learning methods. His approach should be more widely emulated.

The A-B-C-D-F grading system. Where did our A-B-C-D-F grading system come from? How do other countries and other instructional programs evaluate student performance and development? Is this system an adequate one for measuring program effectiveness?

Although the present A-B-C-D-F grading system has been shown to be inadequate as a measure of student development, as well as a measure of program effectiveness, it continues to be used by most American colleges. When a college reports to parents that their son or daughter received B's in three courses and C's in the other two, has it done an adequate job of evaluation? And if the student receives an unsatisfactory report, e.g., three D's and two F's, does the college provide any help or guidance other than saying that the student is now on probation?

What is needed is an evaluation system that is oriented to positive growth and development – one that emphasizes the application of knowledge in real life and recognizes that one of the main purposes of education is to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to function effectively in adult life situations. Far more attention needs to be given to involving students in the evaluation process – from

setting individual learning goals to finding meaningful ways of demonstrating growth. Such an evaluation system should certainly include standardized measures of effectiveness in communication, problem solving, science and technology, and arts appreciation; it should also include a measure of moral (values) development as well as a measure of social responsibility and involvement.

Time as a measure of education. Almost as intriguing as the A-B-C-D-F grading system is the notion that time spent in the classroom is a reliable and useful way of measuring educational achievement. As noted by Lewis in an U. S. Office of Education booklet published 30 years ago: "The piecemeal and kaleidoscopic measurement of... a college education... developed as a result of a number of contributing factors, chiefly the ease of measuring blocks of time and the delay in developing other standardized measures of learning." Lewis points out that although there are a number of definitions of an educated person, "not one of them is based on a certain number of class hours or a certain number of courses or a given number of semesters in attendance at a particular type of institution."

One of the problems with using time as a measuring or limiting device in education is that time spent is not a particularly good measure of the really worthwhile goals in education. Once an education is so measured, and grades assigned to the units, these tend to become objectives in themselves. With our current time-based measurement system, too many students have substituted the acquisition of hours and credits as a replacement for scholarly inquiry and the full development of their abilities.

Our orientation in higher education needs to become more sensitive to the tremendous differences among students – in developed academic abilities, in interests, in moral understandings, in the ability to interact effectively with others, and in the enthusiasm for new learning. We need to appreciate more fully that students, because of their differences in educational preparation, need different amounts of time to reach various educational bench-marks. We also need to develop a far better system for reporting student progress and competencies in all the worthwhile goals which motivate students to come to our colleges.

VII. **The college that cares about the retention of its students should keep accurate records about retention/graduation.**

It is probably a truism that we keep good records about those things which we believe are important in our lives – the person on a diet keeps good records about weight loss; the dedicated bowler records his bowling scores and can always boast if his average has improved; the fundamentalist minister knows how many souls he has saved. Although colleges keep good records about enrollment and are able to compute a student's grade average to the thousandth of a point, few colleges are able to provide up-to-date retention data about their incoming students over a period of several years. More typically, colleges have done isolated studies of their retention rates – often in response to a questionnaire from a state board of education or a prospective funding agency. One reason so few colleges keep good retention data is the lack of a generally accepted definition of retention. Also, the corresponding lack of a common method of computing retention statistics has hindered this effort; the problem of how to handle transfer students has also often hampered studies of retention/graduation.

The form used for obtaining retention/graduation data from the member colleges of the United Negro College Fund is shown as Appendix A. (The years shown on the form are for illustrative purposes.) Note that this form obtains retention data by asking for the number of entering first-time freshmen from successive years who returned at the beginning of subsequent years. It also asks for the number who were graduated after four, five, or more years. From this form it is possible to compute the retention and graduation rates of entering freshmen over time and to determine whether the rates are improving or declining.

Summary

American colleges have a serious problem in retaining and graduating students. In particular, black students face formidable odds in completing a four-year college program. To cope with this problem a number of suggestions were offered. The need to provide appropriate remedial/developmental support was stressed. The importance of adequate financial aid for all enrolled students was emphasized as was the value of giving more attention, responsibility, and concern to the individual student. Three established practices in American colleges were questioned with regard to their effect. The desirability of better retention records was discussed. If these steps are going to be implemented, vigorous leadership will be required.

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APPENDIX A

RETENTION AND GRADUATION FORM

In supplying data below, do not include new students who transferred from other colleges. The X's in the boxes indicate data cells for which data cannot be supplied at the present time.

Retention	Fall 1984	Fall 1985	Fall 1986	Fall 1987	Fall 1988	Fall 1989
A. No. of new (first-time-in-college) freshmen.						
B. No. of students from line A who returned for a 2nd year.						
C. No. of students from line A who returned for a 3rd year.						X
D. No. of students from line A who returned for a 4th year.					X	X
E. No. of students from line A who returned for a 5th or 6th year.				X	X	X
Graduation						
F. No. of students from line A who graduated in 4 years (or less).				X	X	X
G. No. of students from line A who graduated in 5 years or less (including those from line F).			X	X	X	X
H. No. of students from line A who graduated in six years or less (including those from lines F & G).		X	X	X	X	X

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